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ABSTRACT

At Bank Street College of Education, the Children's Book Committee annually reviews approximately 3,000 books to select the 600 or so considered the best books for children published that year. In selecting books, high priority is given to a book's appropriateness to a child's stage of emotional, social, and cognitive development. Since individual children's development is highly variable, the guidelines are just guidelines. Three- and four-year-old children are very egocentric and their thinking is concrete. The world they experience is the only world that exists. It is important that picture books have an equal partnership between words and pictures, with each element enhancing the other. Children expand their knowledge of the world through books. Many books that appeal to preschool children will also be of interest to kindergartners and first graders because they can view them with new eyes. Their thinking is less egocentric than preschoolers but still very concrete. They are leaving a world seeped in fantasy for a world of reality. Schoolwork changes from play-based learning to more structured academics. Five- and six-year-olds are also ready for more complex concept books. Second and third graders are reality based. They can understand that beyond their personal experience, people and things exist. Children this age are also interested in sharing stories about the past, especially a past that can be linked to the child's present. Reading aloud to children not only creates a bond between reader and listeners, but is also the best way of instilling a lifelong love of books and literature. (Lists 61 recommended books listed by readers' age level.) (NKA)

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Developmental Considerations in Selecting Books for Children.

by Laura R. Cohen with Alice B. Belgray and Margery Fisher

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Developmental Considerations in Selecting Books for Children

The TUTOR, Winter 1998 Special Supplement

LEARNS – Linking Education and America Reads through National Service

By Laura R. Cohen with Alice B. Belgray and Margery Fisher The Children's Book Committee, Bank Street College of Education

"Read it again." These three simple words encapsulate a child's delight with a particular story or reading experience. How does one select a book to elicit this response when reading aloud to a young child?

At Bank Street College of Education, the Children's Book Committee annually reviews approximately three thousand books to select the six hundred or so that we believe are the best books published for children that year. In selecting books, we give high priority to a book's appropriateness to a child's stage of emotional, social, and cognitive development. One word of caution: individual children's development is highly variable. Our guidelines are just guidelines. Know the children you're working with, their fears, wonders, and interests, and adjust your selections accordingly.

Preschool

An often-heard refrain with respect to preschool children is that they are "like sponges." Children explore the world with their senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and feel), make meaning out of their experiences, and constantly redefine, refine, and confirm their hypotheses about the world.

Three and four-year-old children are very egocentric and their thinking is concrete. The world they experience is the only world that exists. What cannot be seen, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled does not exist in their minds. Children have a general sense of past, present, and future in that events in their lives have either occurred, are occurring, or will occur, but they do not have a precise understanding of yesterday, today, or tomorrow.

Children's experiences at this age are limited. It is important that picture books have an equal partnership between words and pictures, with each element enhancing the other. Children expand their knowledge of the world through books. Where a book's topic may be alien to children's life experiences, pictures help them visualize what they have never seen. Together, pictures and context facilitate children's efforts to expand their vocabulary. For example, most three and four-year-old children, whether or not they have ever been to a zoo or visited Africa, are able to identify lions, tigers, and elephants. Through pictures and text, urban children learn about country life and rural children learn about city life.

Books can also present concepts to children, such as Bill Martin and John Archambault's *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, a book that explores the alphabet with a calypso beat or Bill Martin's *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* and Eric Carle's *The Very Busy Spider*, both of which introduce animals and colors. Concept books can entertain and instruct in a delightful and mindstretching way.

Three-year-olds have recently mastered toileting. For many, this is their first conscious memory of achieving competence (most children do not remember learning to sit, crawl, walk, or talk). With their newfound sense of competence and their ability to control bodily functions, three and four-year-olds seek autonomy, independence, and control over themselves and the people around them. They can chafe at all the rules and restrictions being placed on them. No wonder Curious George is such a beloved character for these children. This very curious monkey disobeys authority, has some exciting adventures, gets himself into trouble he cannot get himself out of, and is rescued by his caregiver, the man in the yellow hat. Curious George does what the three or four-year-old would not dare.

But this independence comes with a price. Three and four-year-olds can be fearful of the elements that they cannot control in their own life such as the dark, thunder and lightning, and their very own emotions—especially the range of angry and aggressive feelings they can have towards an older or younger sibling. Further complicating the issue of fears is that three and four-year-olds can not separate fantasy from reality. For example, they wish in their heart of hearts that something terrible would befall their baby brother or sister, but if something does happen, no amount of logic will absolve them from their sense of responsibility.

Fantasy, such as Hiawyn Oram's *Angry Arthur*, in which a young boy is so angry that his home veritably explodes, and Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, in which a boy's banishment to his bedroom following wild behavior is followed up with a still warm supper, help young children address aggression. Ed Emberley's *Go Away, Big Green Monster!* in which a monster is stripped of its scary elements, and fairy tales, such as *Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Hansel and Gretel*, empower children to face their fears and dark thoughts in a nonthreatening manner.

Because of their possible high emotional impact, stories should be predictable and not terrorize the listener. There should be a rational and comforting resolution to any potential trauma. In P.D. Eastman's *Are You My Mother?*,

for example, baby bird is ultimately reunited with his mother, a reassuring outcome for every child.

Humor can defuse a frightening situation as well as entertain. In Phyllis Root's *What Baby Wants* little brother is the only one who understands how to calm a crying baby. *Noisy Nora* seeks her own identity when a new baby arrives at her home. Soothing bedtime stories, such as the great classic, *Goodnight Moon*, can distract small children from their fears.

Slice-of-life books that portray an event in the life of a child, can be very comforting to children of this age. Ezra Jack Keat's *Whistle for Willie* combines urban living, an African-American child, and Peter's simple wish to be able to whistle. *Peter's Chair*, also by Keats, tackles Peter's nascent sibling rivalry when his sister is born.

Nonfiction books that address issues head on can also be very reassuring to children facing personal emotional challenges. Joanna Cole's *A New Baby in the Family* tackles the ambivalence an older child feels when a new sibling disrupts the familiar family structure.

By age three, most normally developing children have mastered the basic rudiments of language. At this stage a child's vocabulary is expanding rapidly, as words are attached to actions and things. Rhyming text and text that plays with words is especially popular with young listeners. The master of word play and humor is Dr. Seuss. His *Hop on Pop, Green Eggs and Ham, The Cat in the Hat*, and *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back* all provide children with the opportunity to memorize the rhythmic text.

Nursery rhymes have fallen into disfavor, but *My Very First Mother Goose* edited by Iona Opie with illustrations by Rosemary Wells, should change that. In this collection, traditional rhymes that were demeaning to girls have been expunged and the illustrations present Wells' trademark bunnies in glorious color—a cheerful, multicultural array.

Three and four-year-olds are aware of physical differences among people, especially on the more obvious dimensions of race, gender, or physical disability. Many children at this age are indifferent to these differences; some children are intrigued while other children may have already figured out that adults can ascribe higher value to certain features over others. Fortunately, in today's vast range of literature, we can find heroes and heroines that any child can identify with and who can instill positive self-worth in the shakiest of egos.

Positive self-image is an issue for all children. We need to be sure that stories do not stereotype race, religion, ethnicity, or gender. While most publishers today make a concerted effort not to stereotype, some of our favorite books from the 1950s, 1960s, and earlier retain that insensitivity. It is important to preread your own childhood favorites before selecting them to read to a child. Sometimes we remember books as better than they were, and as adults see them through different eyes. When many of these books are read with a 1990s sensibility, they may no longer be acceptable. *Hans Brinker* depicts the Jews of Amsterdam in a belittling way. Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series has some unsavory depictions of Native Americans as savages. *Little Black Sambo* , a well-known children's book among people now in their sixties and seventies, portrays a stereotype of African Americans and depicts overt racism.

Among the classics, sexist texts abound for this age group, and readers must always be aware of the problem. *Ira Sleeps Over* is a favorite non-sexist choice that deals with fears of sleeping in a new place.

Kindergarten and First Grade

Many of the books that appeal to preschool children will also be of interest to kindergarten and first grade children because they can view them with new eyes. Kindergarten and first grade children's thinking is less egocentric than preschoolers' but still very concrete. Five and six-year-old children are not capable of abstract thinking, although they are beginning to understand logical relationships, such as cause and effect, reciprocity, and transformations. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow take on real meaning.

Kindergartners and first graders (five and six-year-olds) are leaving a world seeped in fantasy for a world of reality. Schoolwork changes from play-based learning to more structured academics. In the classroom, sandboxes, watertables, and dramatic play areas are gradually replaced with reading, writing, and math centers.

Because most children eagerly embrace the challenge of growing up, we often underestimate the degree of anxiety some children experience. Slice-of-life books which address everyday anxieties, such as Marc Brown's *Arthur's Tooth* or *Arthur's Eyes* and Miriam Cohen's *Will I Have a Friend?*, are very popular with this age group.

Humor is also very effective for cooling off anxiety-laden situations. In Judith Viorst's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, Alexander threatens to move to Australia on a day when nothing goes his way. Harry Allard's and James Marshall's *Miss Nelson is Missing!* addresses children's fears of substitute teachers.

Five and six-year-olds are also ready for more complex concept books. Notable among these books are Ellen Stoll Walsh's *Mouse Paint*, which introduces mixing the primary colors, red, yellow, and blue to make orange, green, and purple, and *Mouse Count*, in which a snake's meal is counted forwards and backwards. Eric Carle's *The Very*

Hungry Caterpillar introduces days of the week, and his *A House for Hermit Crab* introduces the months of the year. In *How Many Snails?* children are asked to count the number of objects on a page that meet specific criteria.

Children seek understanding of the phenomenon around them. Pourquoi tales and creation myths, two types of folktales developed to explain the unexplainable, are popular with children of this age. Among children's favorites are Verna Aardema's *Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears* and her other retellings of African tales.

As children's view of the world moves outward and away from themselves, they begin to develop a sense of morality. They learn that there are rules about behavior and the consequences of not following these rules can have outcomes that may be fair or unfair. For children of this age, it is important that there be consistency between behavior and outcome.

Fables, or stories with a moral and in which there are consequences for behavior, are popular with five and six-year-olds. Among the best loved are *The Tortoise and the Hare* and *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*.

Humorous tales, especially those that poke fun at adults, are endearing for children of this age. There are countless retellings of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, as well as more stories by Dr. Seuss including *Horton Hatches the Egg*, and the magical poetry of Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky.

Second and Third Grade

Second and third graders are reality-based. Children can understand that beyond their personal experience, people and things exist. By third grade, children have developed a sense of place and understand that the world existed before them, and that it will be there after them.

Seven and eight-year-olds are interested in people, present and past. This interest provides an opportunity to introduce biographies, especially stories of people children study in school or are aware of. David A. Adler has written a series of picture book biographies including books about Martin Luther King, Jr., Helen Keller, and Lou Gehrig. There are interesting biographies of contemporary sports heroes, political leaders, and television stars that maintain children's fascination.

Children this age are also interested in sharing stories about the past, especially a past that can be linked to the child's present. *All-of-a-Kind Family*, for example, is a chapter-book story of five Jewish sisters growing up on the Lower East Side of New York City in the early twentieth century. *Follow the Drinking Gourd* tells in words and pictures of how escaping slaves found their way north to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

Seven and eight-year-olds tend to be hardworking and industrious. They are able to focus on a task for long periods of time, and are capable of mastering a lot of information on subjects that interest them. Today, publishers produce excellent books in the nonfiction category that provide in-depth information on diverse topics of interest.

Nonfiction has moved away from the former text book style. The newer nonfiction is accessible to young readers and enjoyable to read. Among the best loved titles for this age group are the *Let's Read and Find Out* science series and *The Magic School Bus* series.

By the time children are seven and eight, the earlier struggle for autonomy has become a battle for independence. While three and four-year-olds want to do things themselves, they accept the presence of an adult nearby. Older children, on the other hand, believe they can function quite well on their own. This fantasy is at the crux of two beloved chapter books, *Pippi Longstocking*, who lives alone with her monkey and horse while her father is "at sea," and *The Boxcar Children*, who live by themselves in an old railroad car rather than go to their mean old grandfather after their mother dies. Many of the most popular books for second- and third-graders successfully combine the hero's industriousness and independence (adults play a small or nonexistent role). In the *Nate the Great* and *Cam Jansen* series, boy and girl detectives solve simple crimes and mysteries with humor and aplomb.

Building and reinforcing positive self-esteem is critical for children in this age group. Some children have already experienced more failure than they can possibly assimilate and others perceive their differences as failure, rather than as potential strengths. Children desperately need to belong. They can feel set apart by physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and weight or by life cicumstances such as being adopted, being an immigrant, or not being able to read or speak the language.

Barbara Cohen's *Molly's Pilgrim*, expands the "pilgrim" experience to all who came to America seeking freedom. *Amazing Grace*, by Mary Hoffman, celebrates the indomitable spirit of an African-American girl who will not accept that she cannot be Peter Pan in the class play because she is a girl and she is black. In Taro Yashima's *Crow Boy*, village classmates treat a Japanese farmboy as a social outcast until a teacher shows interest in him. A young boy visits his family in Puerto Rico and discovers some of its special enchantments in Cruz Martel's *Yagua Days*.

Books that celebrate a culture or custom, or describe a holiday or festival day can instill pride and help a child find her place. Bruce McMillan's *Salmon Summer*, is a

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photoessay of an Aleut boy's summer of fishing on an Alaskan island. *Lion Dancer: Ernie Wan's Chinese New Year* follows one family's preparation and celebration in New York's Chinatown.

Native folktales are part of the rich tapestry of a culture. Children of this age can appreciate more sophisticated folktales, such as John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale*, or Robert San Souci's *The Talking Eggs*. They also like trickster tales, such as Eric Kimmel's *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*, and Gerald McDermott's Native American tales of Raven and Coyote. Appealing tall tales include Steven Kellogg's *Paul Bunyan* and Sid Fleischman's *McBroom Tales*.

Second and third-graders' sense of right and wrong and fairness can be extended to address social issues. Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* addresses the need to preserve and protect our environment. *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes tells the story of a poor girl who is treated cruelly by her more affluent classmates.

Finally, seven and eight-year-old children love slice-of-life chapter books, especially when the stories combine recognizable events with humor, as they do in Beverly Cleary's *Ramona* series or Ann Cameron's *The Stories that Julian Tells*.

Conclusion

Reading aloud to children not only creates a bond between reader and listeners; it is also the best way of instilling a lifelong love of books and literature. Choosing appropriate books will make the experience more pleasurable and meaningful.

We hope that we have given you an appreciation for the wide variety of literature, both fiction and nonfiction that appeals to young children. The following is a list of our favorite children's books to help you in this venture.

Recommended Books for Getting Started

AGES 3-4

Briggs, Raymond, *The Snowman*
Brown, Marcia, *Stone Soup*
Brown, Margaret Wise, *Goodnight Moon*
Cannon, Janell, *Stellaluna*
Carle, Eric, *The Very Busy Spider*
Cole, Joanna, *A New Baby in the Family*
Eastman, P.D., *Are You My Mother?*
Emberley, Ed, *Go Away, Big Green Monster!*
Freeman, Don, *Corduroy*
Hoban, Lillian, *A Baby Sister for Frances*
Johnson, Crockett, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*
Keats, Ezra Jack, *Peter's Chair, Whistle for Willie*
Martin, Bill, *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*
Martin, Bill & John Archambault, *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*
Opie, Iona, ed., *My Very First Mother Goose*
Oram, Hiawyn, *Angry Arthur*
Rey, H.A., *Curious George*
Root, Phyllis, *What Baby Wants*
Sendak, Maurice, *Where the Wild Things Are*
Seuss, Dr., *Green Eggs and Ham*
Slate, Joseph, *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten*
Waber, Bernard, *Ira Sleeps Over*
Wells, Rosemary, *Noisy Nora*
Zolotow, Charlotte, *William's Doll*

AGES 5-6

Aardema, Verna, *Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears*
Allard, Harry and James Marshall, *Miss Nelson is Missing!*
Anno, M, *Anno's Counting Book*
Brown, Marc, *Arthur's Tooth: Arthur's Eyes*
Carle, Eric, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar; A House for Hermit Crab*
Cohen, Miriam, *Will I Have a Friend?*
Giganti, Paul, Jr., *How Many Snails?*
Hazen, Barbara Shook, *Even if I Did Something Awful*
Henkes, Kevin, *Lily's Purple Plastic Purse*
Howe, James, *Pinky and Rex and the New Neighbors*
Rylant, Cynthia, *Henry and Mudge and the Best Day of All*
Viorst, Judith, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*
Walsh, Ellen Stoll, *Mouse Paint, Mouse Count*
Zelinsky, Paul O., *Rapunzel*

AGES 7-8

Adler, David A., *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr., Cam Jansen and the Scary Snake Mystery*
Cameron, Ann, *The Stories Julian Tells*
Cleary, Beverly, *Ramona*
Cohen, Barbara, *Molly's Pilgrim*
Cooney, Barbara, *Miss Rumphius*
Estes, Eleanor, *The Hundred Dresses*
Fleischman, Sid, *McBroom's Ghost, McBroom Tells the Truth*
Hoffman, Mary, *Amazing Grace*
Kellogg, Steven, *Paul Bunyan*
Kimmel, Eric, *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*
Lindgren, Astrid, *Pippi Longstocking*
Martel, Cruz, *Yagua Days*
McDermott, Gerald, *Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest; Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest*
McMillan, Bruce, *Salmon Summer*
San Souci, Robert, *The Talking Eggs*
Seuss, Dr., *The Lorax*
Sharmat, Marjorie Weinman, *Nate the Great*
Steptoe, John, *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale*
Taylor, Sydney, *All-of-a-Kind Family*
Warner, Gertrude Chandler, *The Boxcar Children*
Waters, Kate and Madeline Slovenz-Low, *Lion Dancer: Ernie Wan's Chinese New Year*
Winter, Jeanette, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*
Yashima, Taro, *Crow Boy*

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